

The Grand Rapids Press

Retrain workers

Monday, April 14, 2008

More than citizens from anywhere else in the country, Michigan residents know that times are tough and that even our elected officials face hard financial choices. But the No Worker Left Behind program that retrains laid-off workers for new jobs makes sense. This state has lost 300,000 manufacturing jobs since 2000 and still has the highest unemployment rate. The House approved \$40 million to expand NWLB training. Thousands are seeking a new lease on life. The Senate shouldn't deny them that chance or the state -- to be productive again.

Retraining plays a vital role for people whose jobs have been permanently lost such as in manufacturing. There are certainly many of us who will -- and should -- fight to maintain funding for health, education and public safety. But in these hardest of times, we need to push struggling people, those who have been handed pink slips, back in the workforce so they can support their families. Or they can drain state resources.

Michigan already has a record number of people on food stamps at 1.2 million.

Launched Aug. 1, the Department of Labor and Economic Growth is already getting nearly \$40 million in federal dollars for NWLB. The additional \$40 million would help meet demand. In just a few months, 20,000 displaced workers have enrolled in the NWLB program, including more than 1,600 from Kent, Allegan and Ottawa counties. More funding would help move some 11,000 more individuals off the waiting list.

NWLB is a one-time offer, available to workers -- who are at least 18, currently unemployed or have been notified of termination/layoff. It's offered on a first-come-first-serve basis. Participants will receive up to \$5,000 per year for two years to cover costs for training at any Michigan community college, university or other approved training program. A person's income has to be \$40,000 or less. Interests and skills are assessed at Michigan Works! agencies before each person is guided toward high demand occupations. This will help in some critical shortage areas, such as health-related fields.

Community colleges recognize that the program brings both opportunities and challenges, particularly as it relates to capacity and tracking. Grand Rapids Community College has limited courses to offer students who seek traditional enrollment. But new offerings have been introduced for non-credit such as its Pharmacy Tech programs and other instruction formats are being explored. The \$40 million would include \$5 million to assist with capacity issues. That's a start but not enough if the program grows as expected. Gov. Granholm wants to retrain 100,000 workers. A work group is dealing with tracking woes.

No matter what kind of retraining or continuing education the unemployed seek, 21st century skills are crucial. The NWLB initiative is not trying to put someone in any job but in a good-paying career and one in which the individual has the ability to do well. Ultimately, the success of the program depends on the ability of workers to capitalize on the opportunity.

Starting over is hard. But the thousands seeking a second chance through "No Worker Left Behind" know their old jobs aren't coming back. Michigan senators should accept that as well and provide the training dollars to move workers to the next opportunity for pay checks.